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ABSTRACT

Data from the National Longitudinal Study of 1972 (designed to provide statistics on a national sample of young adults as they moved out of high school into their early adulthood) were utilized to examine the determinants of college attendance with controlling variables, such as family background and students' ability. The sample from base year (1972) and first follow-up (1973) were used in the study. Data indicated that mother's expectation was the most important influence on rural youths' college aspiration and attendance. Next in importance were father's and peers' influence. Teachers' or counselors' encouragement did not appear as an important factor. Finally, the decision by rural youth to enter college was positively associated with high school grades. Self-confidence in completing college study did not contribute as a factor to youths' aspiration. However, it did have a positive effect on actual college attendance, meaning that improving grades in high school and perceived ability in completing college study were likely to encourage college attendance of rural youth. (Author/CM)

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RURAL YOUTHS' DECISIONS TO ATTEND COLLEGE: ASPIRATIONS AND REALIZATIONS

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Abstract

This paper examines the college attendance decision of rural youths. Specifically, the study analyzes the effects of peers', teachers', counselors', and parents' influences on college attendance along with other variables such as students' grades in high school, family SES, number of siblings, and students' self-conception of ability in handling college study. The data used are from a longitudinal study. The dependent variables are (1) students' aspiration and plan to attend college which was obtained while the sample were high school seniors, and (2) students' actual college attendance which was obtained one year after the sample graduated from high school. Among others, mother's expectation is the most powerful influence on rural youths' college decision and attendance.

Many studies have shown that high school students from urban areas are more likely to plan on attending college than high school students from rural areas (Sewell, 1964; Burchinal, 1961; Nelson, 1973). Although less clear is an understanding as to why these differences occur, it is important to discover and identify the factors associated with the educational aspiration of rural youth and to assess which of those can be brought about to attain higher educational achievement for them.

Models on the educational attainment have well demonstrated the great impact on college aspiration and attendance through the three agents, namely, the family, the school, and one's peer group (Sewell and Hauser, 1972; McDill and Coleman, 1965; and Duncan, et al., 1968). The "significant others," including parents, peers, teachers, and counselors have been noted as important to setting youths' aspirations and expectations (Bordna, 1970; Sewell and Shah, 1968; Haller and Woelfel, 1972; Mueller, 1974; Hansen and Ross, 1980). However, the relative importance among these "significant others" and other factors on influencing youths' decision on college attendance, particularly for rural youth, remains largely unexplored.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the determinants of college attendance decision of rural youths. Specially, the study analyzes the effects of parents', peers', teachers', and counselors' influences on college aspiration and attendance with controlling variables, such as family background and students' ability.

The Data

Data were from the National Longitudinal Study (NLS) of the high school seniors initiated in 1972. The NLS, supported by the National Center for Education Statistics and conducted by the Educational Testing Service and the

Research Triangle Institute, was designed to provide statistics on a national sample of young adults as they moved out of high school into their early adulthood.

The sample from base year (1972) and first follow-up (1973) were used in this study. Rural youth in this study was defined as those who resided in a rural or farming community during their senior year in high school. After deleting the missing cases in any of the variables used in the study, 1714 rural youth was the sample for analysis.

Dependent Variables

There were two dependent variables in this study: (1) rural youths' aspiration to attend college which was obtained while the sample were high school seniors, and (2) rural youths' actual college attendance which was obtained one year after the sample graduated from high school. The variables were measured as dummy variables, with the value of one if the respondent desired to attend or actually attended college and zero otherwise.

Independent Variables

The determinants proposed to affect rural youths' decision in attending college were (1) family background information, (2) high school grades and self confidence in handling college study, and (3) influences or expectations from parents, peers, teachers, or counselors. The measurement of these independent variables are described as follows:

(1) Family background information consisted of four variables--the highest educational levels that the respondent's father completed, mother completed, the respondent's parents' income from all sources, and number of siblings which a respondent had.

(2) High school grades were measured by a continuous variable which ranged from mostly A to mostly below D, as reported by the respondents.

(3) Rural youths' self confidence in handling college study was coded one if the respondent indicated that he/she would definitely have the ability to complete college and zero if otherwise.

(4) Teachers' or counselors' influence on going to college was coded one if a respondent indicated that teachers or counselors encouraged him/her to go to college and zero if otherwise.

(5) Peers' influence on going to college was coded one if a respondent indicated that most of his/her close friends planned to go to college and zero if otherwise.

(6) Father's influence on going to college was coded one if a respondent indicated that his/her father wanted the respondent to attend college and zero if otherwise.

(7) Mother's influence on going to college was coded one if a respondent indicated that his/her mother wanted the respondent to attend college and zero if otherwise.

Statistical Method

As mentioned previously, there were two dependent variables: (1) students' college aspiration when the sample were high school seniors and (2) students' actual college attendance one year after the sample graduated from high school. The proposed independent variables were regressed on these two dependent variables, respectively. The multiple regression method was selected because it permitted study of the degree of relationship between a dependent variable and an independent variable, with controlling other independent variables.

Findings

The mean scores and standard deviations of all the variables used in the study are shown in Table 1. The table indicates that about 67% of school teachers or counselors encouraged rural youth to go to college, about 48% and about 52% of fathers and mothers, respectively, would want their children to to to college. Forty-nine percent of rural youth reported that most of their close friends planned to go to college. While 52% of rural youth in high

school in 1972 expressed a desire to receive higher education, only 33% of them actually entered college the year after their senior year in high school.

The regression results of the determinants of college aspiration and actual college attendance are presented on Table 2. The overall regression results for two dependent variables were all statistically significant. Grades in high school, parents' influence, and peers' influence were significantly related to college aspiration and actual college attendance. Rural youth with high grades in high school would be more likely to go and did actually go to college than those with lower grades. Father's and mother's expectation of their children going to college had an effect on youths' aspiration and attending college. Youths reported that most of their close friends' planning to go to college would more likely result in their planning and actually going to college than others. Teachers' or counselors' encouragement in receiving higher education affected rural youths' aspiration but not actual college attendance. It was assumed that parental education would be positively associated with young adults' taste for education and consequently with the probability of college attendance. Father's education and mother's education were examined separately in affecting rural youths' college aspiration and attendance. Father's education had a positive effect on college aspiration, while mother's education had a positive effect on college attendance. Rural youths who indicated that they had confidence in completing college study were more likely to actually attend college, while self confidence in completing college study did not have effect on youths' college aspiration. Family income and number of siblings a respondent had did not show any association with rural youths' college aspiration and attendance after controlling other characteristics.

The standardized regression coefficient is usually used to measure the relative importance of variables in a regression analysis. Judging from the

standardized regression coefficients on Table 2, influences through mothers, fathers, and peers have shown much stronger effects than other variables in affecting college aspiration and attendance. Among these three, mother's expectation for youth to go to college had the strongest effect. Proportion of variances explained by the explanatory variables were about the same for college aspiration and attendance, 30% and 34% respectively.

Discussion and Conclusion

The most salient finding of this research is that the decision of rural youth to enter college is strongly influenced by mother's expectation. Respondents who reported that their mothers expected them to go to college were more likely to plan to enter college and consequently had higher probability of attending college. This finding might support the notion of mother-centeredness in the contemporary American family. According to Meier, "the overwhelming interactional salience of the mother with children in our highly nucleated family structure is undeniably conducive to the formation of excessively strong mother-child attachment" (1972, p. 115). The empirical evidence show that mother's encouragement in receiving postsecondary education was the most important factor in rural youths' college aspiration and attendance.

Next to mother's influence were father's and peers' influence. Teachers' or counselors' encouragement did not appear as an important factor in rural youths' decision in affecting college education. The less important role of teachers/counselors than family and friends in rural youths' educational or career choice was also reported in other studies (Hansen and Ross, 1980; Picon and Carter, 1976; Mueller, 1974).

Finally, this study documents that the decision on the part of rural youth to enter college was also positively associated with high school grades. Self-confidence in completing college study did not contribute as a factor

to youths' aspiration, however, it did have a positive effect on actual college attendance. It means that improving grades in high school and perceived ability in completing college study will be likely to encourage college attendance of rural youth.

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Table 1. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of the Variables

Variables	Mean Scores	Standard Deviations
Grades in high school ^(a)	3.14	1.40
Teachers'/Counselors' influence	0.67	0.47
Peers' influence	0.49	0.50
Fathers' influence	0.48	0.50
Mother's influence	0.52	0.50
Father's education ^(b)	3.31	1.86
Mother's education ^(b)	3.35	1.67
Family income ^(c)	4.84	2.65
Number of siblings	3.47	2.35
Self-confidence in handling college study	0.40	0.49
College aspiration	0.52	0.50
Actual college attendance	0.33	0.47

Number of Cases = 1714

(a) Grades in high school was coded as follows:

- Mostly A 1
- About half A and half B 2
- Mostly B 3
- About half B and half C 4
- Mostly C 5
- About half C and half D 6
- Mostly D 7
- Mostly below D 8

Table 1. Mean Scores and Standard Deviations of the Variables, Continued

(b) Father's and mother's education were coded as follows:

Did not complete high school	2
Finished high school or equivalent	3
Adult education program	4
Business or trade school	5
Some college	6
Finished college (four years)	7
Attended graduate or professional school (for example, law or medical school), but did did not obtain a graduate or professional degree	8
Obtained a graduate or professional degree (for example, M.A., Ph.D., or M.D.)	9

(c) Family income was the respondent's answer to the question in 1972, "What is the approximate income before taxes of your parents? Include taxable and non-taxable income from all sources." The answer was coded as follows:

Less than \$3,000 a year	1
Between \$3,000 and \$5,999 a year	2
Between \$6,000 and \$7,499 a year	3
Between \$7,500 and \$8,999 a year	4
Between \$9,000 and \$10,499 a year	5
Between \$10,500 and \$11,999 a year	6
Between \$12,000 and \$13,499 a year	7
Between \$13,500 and \$14,999 a year	8
Between \$15,000 and \$18,000 a year	9
Over \$18,000 a year	10

Table 2. Regression Results

Explanatory Variables	College Aspiration			Actual College Attendance		
	B	Beta	F-ratio	B	Beta	F-ratio
Grades in high school	-0.05	-0.15	39.39***	-0.04	-0.12	30.66**
Teachers'/Counselors' influence	0.05	0.04	4.11**	0.02	0.02	0.60
Peers' influence	0.11	0.11	22.25**	0.16	0.18	61.16**
Father's influence	0.17	0.17	24.67**	0.15	0.16	21.87**
Mother's influence	0.21	0.21	36.70**	0.19	0.20	33.97**
Father's education	0.02	0.07	8.06**	0.00	0.01	0.19
Mother's education	0.01	0.03	2.06	0.03	0.11	23.63**
Family income	-0.00	-0.00	0.01	0.00	0.02	0.97
Number of siblings	0.00	0.00	0.10	0.00	0.01	0.18
Self-confidence in handling college study	0.02	0.02	1.08	0.07	0.07	10.33**
Constant		0.30			0.04	
Adjusted R ²		0.30			0.34	
F-ratio		74.98			89.75	
Number of Cases		1714			1714	

** p < 0.01

* p < 0.05